



2026 US250 Persona Poem Project & Contest



What is the US250 Persona Poem Project? 2026 marks the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Highland Park Poetry & the Illinois State Poetry Society are accepting submissions of persona poems that explore a moment in U.S. history from about 1765 – 1800, the time period leading up to and during the War for Independence and the creation of the United States of America. This is a big story and we know there is more to it than what we were told. We want to meet the heroes, heroines, villains, and witnesses, including those not often included in high school history books.

What is a Persona Poem? A persona, from the Latin for mask, is a character taken on by a poet to speak in a first-person poem. Each poem is to capture a moment of this history as told from the perspective of a person living during this time period (*either fictional or based on an actual person*). An example of this is Marjorie Rissman's poem *Witness #3: Coroner's Inquest*, written from the point of view of a local boy who climbs in the Stupey Cabin window and discovers the body of a murder victim. Rissman used an actual historic event but crafted a fictional persona to share the narrative (*copy of poem attached*).

What does the project include? (1) Publication of a poetry anthology containing poems selected by representatives from Highland Park Poetry, the Illinois State Poetry Society and (2) the award of three \$250 prizes for poems selected by guest judge Lynne Viti, faculty emerita of Wellesley College and inaugural poet laureate of Westwood, Massachusetts, and (3) story theater-style performances of select poems by local theater groups across the State of Illinois and potentially further.

What is the timeline for this project?

~~December 1~~ Extended to December 31, 2025 - Deadline for Poem Submissions. *This will allow for selection of final poems and shaping work into a dramatic performance script. Selected poets will be notified on or before February 1st.*

May 2026 - Publication of the US250 Persona Poem Project Anthology.

May through December 2026 - Story theater performances are locally curated and produced programs using poems from the US250 Persona Poem Project. This means that each performance is potentially unique – e.g., a performance in Lake Forest, Illinois may differ from one in Carbondale, Illinois.

How do Poets Participate?

• **Research American History** between 1765 – 1800 and write a persona poem inspired by a historical event or person. The poet is responsible for conducting their own research and should, if possible, indicate source(s).

• **Poem Submission, Entry Form & \$10 Reading Fee** – Submit up to 3 persona poems, \$10 Reading Fee and entry form either electronically or by U.S. Mail. Check or money order payable to Highland Park Poetry. OR on PAYPAL – paypal.me/HighlandParkPoetry

§ **Via Electronic Submission:** Send poem as text in the body of an e-mail or as a .doc or .pdf attachment to: Jennifer@highlandparkpoetry.org. Please put “US250 Persona Poetry” in the subject line of your e-mail.

§ **Submissions by U.S. Mail:** Send poem(s), completed/signed Entry/Release form to: Highland Park Poetry c/o Jennifer Dotson, 1690 Midland Avenue, Highland Park, IL 60035

How will poems be selected? Poetry submissions will be reviewed & selected by special committee including representatives from Highland Park Poetry, the Illinois State Poetry Society, and guest judge for the prizes. Theater groups performing selections from the project make their own selections.

Note: While members of the selection committee, former students, family and close friends of Judge Lynne Viti are eligible to submit work for inclusion in the anthology, they are not eligible for \$250 prize consideration.





2026 US250 Persona Poetry Entry Form

Poet's Name _____

Email Address _____ Phone _____

Mailing Address _____

City, State, Zip, & Country (*if outside the US*) _____

Poem Title(s) (limit 3) _____

Connection to US History between 1765 - 1800 _____

Has work been previously published? ____ Yes ____ No

If Yes, please indicate where & when _____

Submissions:

- Should express the writer's experiences, thoughts or feelings related to U.S. history between 1765 - 1800 and should be written in the form of a persona poem
- Previously published works are accepted but please indicate where and when the work first appeared
- Original poetry of 80 lines or fewer.

Release Form: Submissions must include a copy of the following completed form indicating your acknowledgement that (1) your submission is original and is not a copy or derivative of any other work and is not generated by AI and (2) Highland Park Poetry, the Illinois State Poetry Society, and *the US250 Persona Poem Project* have your irrevocable permission, without restriction, to use your work in original form or reproduction for exhibition, advertising, educational and promotional materials for this event as well as other events as Highland Park Poetry, the Illinois State Poetry Society, and *the US250 Persona Poem Project* may determine in its sole and absolute discretion.

PLEASE PRINT

Poet's Signature: _____ Date: _____

*The horses in the barn were raising a ruckus
starving and wanting out of the barn
I was left to care for them so I fed them,
gave them water then led them out to pasture
came back to muck their stalls but Pa was
waiting for me all distressed and anxious
wanting me to climb through a window
to enter the Stupey Cabin to unlock the door.*

*I did as asked and let Pa and a neighbor
inside then we walked around and found
nothing amiss on the first floor but no one
was there either so we climbed up to the attic
second floor and found him on his bed. Pa
told me to go back down but I was too keen
on the scene to do as I was told and I am so
sorry I disobeyed my Pa but a boy has to be
a boy or why be one at all so I stayed in the
doorway watching and listening to the men.*

*And it was then that I saw a dead man for the
very first time half covered by a blanket with
his old coat on top of that. I could see his eyes
staring at the ceiling and smelled dried blood and see
the puddle of it glistening on the floor board next
to the bed but the blood was no longer dripping. I
could see the gun in his right hand but that made
no sense as he was left-handed and the hole in his
head was also on the right side. I knew at once that
he had not killed himself but that I was at the doorway
of a murder site, And I got a little shaky in the knees
wondering who would kill the harness salesman, the man
who took his meals at my Pa's house and always had
a great story to tell about this farmer or that, this horse
or that, the farm on the other side of the river...oh, well,
no more stories from him.*

*He told me once in confidence that he loved a lady from
Highland Park and that he was courting her with the
intent of marriage. He was living in the Cabin to save
money to buy her a ring and rent a suitable house for
them. He was very worried however because another
man was also pursuing her hand and he was thus unsure
of the outcome. There was no ring or money to be found
in the attic and even his pocket watch was missing so
there appeared to be more than murder amiss in the
Cabin.*

*That is all I have to say about the mystery I witnessed
but I hope the person responsible for these deeds will
be found so I can sleep better at night and stop dreaming
about the lady with the broken heart and no ring on her
finger and about the next boarder at Stupey Cabin and
what will happen to him. There is a ghost living there
for sure.*

WITNESS # 3: Coroner's Inquest

By Marjorie Rissman

*1st Prize Winner of
2017 Stupey Cabin Poetry
Contest*

To view a PowerPoint
presentation about
writing persona poems
including examples and
tips, please contact
Jennifer[at]highlandpark
poetry.org

